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MILITARY PERSONNEL

DOD Should Develop a Plan to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Its Career Intermission Pilot Program

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Why GAO Did This Study

Congress authorized CIPP in 2009 to provide greater flexibility in career paths for servicemembers and to enhance retention. CIPP allows servicemembers to take sabbaticals of up to 3 years in exchange for 2 months of obligated service for each month of sabbatical taken. The Navy is the only service to have participants who have completed sabbaticals.

Senate Report 113-211 included a provision for GAO to examine CIPP, and particularly the Navy's experience with it. This report (1) evaluates the extent to which participation in CIPP has reached authorized participation limits and DOD has developed a plan for evaluating whether the program is an effective means to retain servicemembers; and (2) describes the Navy's reported experience with CIPP as a tool for aiding retention by providing career flexibility.

GAO reviewed CIPP legislation and implementation guidance, interviewed DOD and service officials responsible for CIPP, and compared the information obtained against key features of pilot evaluation plans such as clear, measurable objectives and standards for determining pilot-program performance. GAO also reviewed Navy efforts to implement CIPP and, using a GAO-developed questionnaire, collected information from Navy CIPP participants who had completed their sabbaticals.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD develop and implement a plan to evaluate whether CIPP is enhancing retention. DOD concurred with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-16-35](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

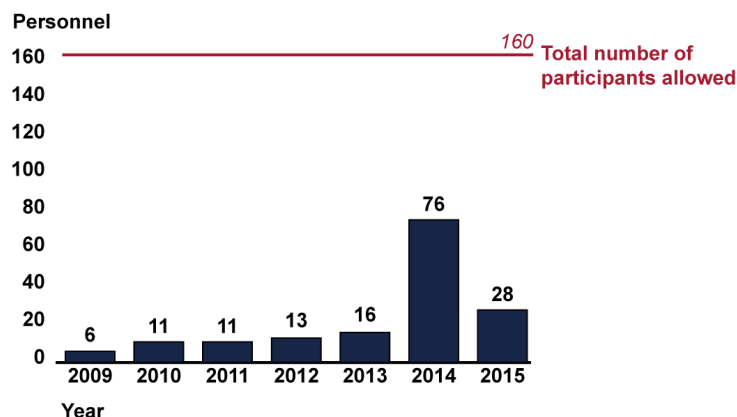
MILITARY PERSONNEL

DOD Should Develop a Plan to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Its Career Intermission Pilot Program

What GAO Found

Participation in the Department of Defense's (DOD) Career Intermission Pilot Program (CIPP)—a pilot program expiring in 2019 that allows servicemembers to take up to a 3-year break in service in exchange for a period of obligated service when they return—has remained below statutorily authorized limits, and officials have identified factors that could be affecting CIPP participation, but DOD has not developed a plan for evaluating whether CIPP is an effective means to retain servicemembers. DOD-wide participation in CIPP has been at less than half the authorized limit of 160 participants—up to 40 participants for each of the four services—per calendar year (see figure below). Service officials stated that factors affecting participation include statutory requirements, such as eligibility criteria, and military culture, among others. CIPP-authorizing legislation and DOD guidance require the services to report on the effectiveness of the pilot, including effect on retention and program costs; however, neither DOD nor the services have developed a plan for evaluating the pilot program. GAO has reported that a pilot program should have a well-developed and documented evaluation plan, including key features such as well-defined, clear, and measurable objectives and standards for determining pilot-program performance. Moreover DOD has proposed expansion of the pilot, and officials stated that CIPP should be made available permanently. However, the basis for these proposals is unclear, and without a well-developed plan for evaluating the pilot, there will be limited assurance that the evaluations conducted will provide the information needed to make decisions about the future of CIPP.

Total Number of Participants Approved to Participate by All Military Services for Calendar Years 2009 through July 2015



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-16-35

According to Navy officials, CIPP has provided an option for the Navy to respond to the personal needs of servicemembers, and they believe it has helped to retain servicemembers who otherwise might have left the military. CIPP participants also provided GAO with examples of how the program allowed them to address work-life balance challenges, such as managing deployment schedules and caring for family, that could not be achieved using other options.

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Abbreviations

CIPP	Career Intermission Pilot Program
DOD	Department of Defense
JAG	Judge Advocate General's
OUSD(P&R)	Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness

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October 27, 2015

Congressional Committees

The Secretary of Defense has cited challenges for the Department of Defense (DOD) in attracting and retaining servicemembers with skills that are in high demand in corporate America, and stated that DOD needs to provide more flexible career paths to retain the best troops.¹ The Career Intermession Pilot Program (CIPP) was authorized by Congress in 2009, with the intent of enhancing retention and providing greater flexibility in the career path of servicemembers.² CIPP allows interested servicemembers to take a sabbatical of up to 3 years in order to meet personal or professional needs, such as pursuing higher education or caring for ailing parents or young children, and then return to active duty with no adverse career effect. CIPP was initially authorized to accept participants beginning January 1, 2009, with no servicemembers to be released from active duty under the program after December 31, 2012. After subsequent extensions the program is currently authorized until December 31, 2019.³ The Navy in 2009 became the first service to implement CIPP, followed by the Marine Corps in 2013, and the Air Force and the Army in 2014.

Senate Report No. 113-211 included a provision for GAO to examine CIPP and the military services' participation in the program and, in particular, to examine the Navy's experience with the program.⁴ This report (1) evaluates the extent to which participation in CIPP has reached authorized participation limits and DOD has developed a plan for

¹The Secretary made the comments in a March 30, 2015, speech on the force of the future at a high school in Abington, Pennsylvania. For the purposes of this report, we are using the term "servicemembers" to include officers and enlisted members of DOD's Armed Service components, and members on active guard and reserve duty.

²Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009, Pub. L. No. 110-417, § 533 (Oct. 14, 2008).

³Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, Pub. L. No. 113-291, § 522(a) (December 2014).

⁴S. Rep. No. 113-211, accompanying S. 2437, the Senate's version of the Department of Defense Appropriations Bill (2015).

evaluating whether the program is an effective means to retain servicemembers, and (2) describes the Navy's reported experience with CIPP as a tool for aiding retention by providing career flexibility.

To identify the extent to which CIPP has met authorized participation limits and DOD has developed a plan for evaluating whether the program is an effective means to retain servicemembers, we reviewed CIPP implementation and reporting requirements, including the requirement to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, established in the NDAA for fiscal years 2009, 2012, 2013, and 2015.⁵ Also, we reviewed Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD(P&R)) guidance provided to the services, as well as service-specific CIPP implementation guidance. In addition, we interviewed OUSD(P&R) officials and CIPP program managers for each of the four services—including the Navy's Military Personnel Plans and Policies office; the Air Force's Military Force Management Policy office; the Army's Military Personnel Management Directorate within the Deputy Chief of Staff Army G1 office, and Human Resources Command; and the Marine Corps' Manpower & Reserve Affairs office. We compared the documentation and information obtained against key features of program evaluation plans developed by GAO and private professional auditing and evaluation organizations.⁶ The key features in the public and private standards

⁵The pilot program has twice been extended; first through December 31, 2015, in the fiscal year 2012 NDAA, and then through December 31, 2019, in the fiscal year 2015 NDAA. The fiscal year 2013 NDAA extended the program to active guard and reserve personnel. See the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, Pub. L. No. 112-81, § 531(a) (Dec. 31, 2011), the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 Pub.L.No. 112-239, §522(a) (Jan. 2, 2013), and Pub. L. No. 113-291, § 522(a) (Dec. 19, 2014).

⁶GAO, *Tax Administration: IRS Needs to Strengthen Its Approach for Evaluating the SRFMI Data-Sharing Pilot Program*. [GAO-09-45](#) (Washington, D.C. Nov. 7, 2008). In this report, we were asked to assess the Internal Revenue Service's plan to evaluate the effectiveness of a pilot program. In doing so, we identified key features for evaluating the effectiveness of pilot programs by reviewing social science and evaluation literature, along with published GAO guidance. Specifically, key features of an evaluation plan were based on measures collectively described in the following reports: P.H. Rossi, M.W. Lipsey, and H.E. Freeman, *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: 2004); GAO, *Designing Evaluations*, [GAO/PEMD-10.1.4](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 1991); GAO, *Assessing Social Program Impact Evaluations: A Checklist Approach*, PAD-79-1 (Washington, D.C.: October 1978); B.R. Worthen, J.R. Sanders, and J.L. Fitzpatrick, *Program Evaluation: Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines* (New York, N.Y.: 1997). Since [GAO-09-45](#) was published, [GAO/PEMD-10.1.4](#) has been superseded by GAO, *Designing Evaluations*, [GAO-12-208](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2012).

include establishing well-defined, clear, and measurable objectives and standards for determining pilot-program performance. To identify what factors, if any, have affected CIPP participation, we reviewed statutory and service-specific guidance to identify eligibility criteria for participating in CIPP, and we discussed with CIPP officials the extent to which these criteria and other factors affect participation. In addition, we collected and reviewed CIPP applicant data by gender, servicemember rank, and reason for and length of requested sabbatical, as well as data indicating the reasons why applicants were disapproved for the program. We interviewed service officials responsible for maintaining CIPP participation data to determine the data collection and internal control processes used to ensure data accuracy. Based on these conversations and our review of available documentation, we determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this review.

To review the Navy's reported experience with CIPP as a tool for aiding retention of servicemembers by providing career flexibility, we reviewed the Navy's efforts to implement the program from 2009 to the present. We reviewed Navy policy and procedures for implementing CIPP as well as reports provided to Congress on the implementation and participation of Navy personnel in the program, along with preliminary data on the program's effect on retention. In addition, we interviewed Navy headquarters officials and officials responsible for implementing CIPP in four of the Navy's servicemember communities—Surface Warfare Officer, Aviation Officer, Submarine Officer, and Enlisted personnel. To understand the extent to which CIPP has provided flexibility in the personal and professional needs of servicemembers, we collected non-generalizable data through an email questionnaire sent to 33 Navy CIPP participants who had completed sabbaticals as of June 2015. We received responses from 17 participants.⁷

We conducted this performance audit from March 2015 to October 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain

⁷Data collected are non-generalizable, and they allowed us to report anecdotal examples of the experiences of CIPP participants. Among the participants, officers responded to the questionnaire at a higher percentage rate than did enlisted (i.e., officers represented about half the participants—49 percent—but represented a clear majority of the respondents—63 percent). Additionally, a somewhat higher percentage of women responded relative to their representation in the participant population.

sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

The NDAA for fiscal year 2009 initially authorized CIPP as a pilot program through December 31, 2012, establishing basic eligibility criteria for participants, providing guidelines for implementing the program, and establishing congressional reporting requirements. Specifically:

- For each calendar year from 2009 through 2012, up to 20 officers and 20 enlisted servicemembers per military service are authorized to leave active duty for a period not to exceed 3 years.⁸ For each month of sabbatical taken, servicemembers must complete two months of obligated service upon their return to active duty.
- Servicemembers who have completed their initial active duty service agreement and are not currently receiving a critical skills retention bonus are eligible to participate.⁹
- During their sabbatical, all servicemembers are required to serve in the Individual Ready Reserve¹⁰ and are required to undergo such inactive duty training as shall be required by the Secretary involved in order to ensure that the servicemember retains sufficient proficiency in the military skills, professional qualifications and physical readiness.

⁸Authorizing legislation and related DOD guidance do not place restrictions on what participants can do during their sabbatical.

⁹Service obligations generally require that servicemembers who join the armed forces serve for a total initial period of not less than 6 years nor more than 8 years (10 USC § 651), but servicemembers in certain career fields may have longer initial service periods. Servicemembers who are qualified in a critical military skill or assigned to a high priority unit under 37 U.S.C. § 355 are eligible to receive a critical skills bonus in exchange for a period of obligated service.

¹⁰Individual Ready Reserve is a manpower pool consisting principally of personnel who have had training, served previously in the active component or in the selected reserve, and have some period of their military service obligation remaining.

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- During sabbaticals, servicemembers receive two-thirtieths of their salary (i.e. 2-days pay per month) and maintain full health benefits for themselves and their dependents. In addition, DOD provides participants and their dependents with a paid relocation within the United States. For example, if servicemembers are taking a sabbatical to attend school, DOD will pay for them to move to the location of their educational program. At the end of the servicemember's sabbatical, DOD will pay the costs to relocate the servicemember to his or her next assignment.

The NDAA for fiscal year 2015 kept these NDAA fiscal year 2009 guidelines and extended the program, allowing for servicemembers to start sabbaticals through December 31, 2019, returning to active duty no later than December 31, 2022. Appendix I shows when each military service implemented CIPP and the number of participants approved by each service as of July 2015. The fiscal year 2015 NDAA also extended the date for DOD to provide a final report to Congress—from March 1, 2016, to March 1, 2023, and it added additional reporting elements. DOD is now required to report the following:

- A description of the number of applicants for the pilot program and the criteria used to select individuals for participation in the pilot program.
- An evaluation of whether the authorities of the pilot programs provided an effective means to enhance the retention of members of the armed forces possessing critical skills, talents, and leadership abilities.
- An evaluation of whether the career progression in the armed forces of individuals who participate in the pilot program has been or will be adversely affected; and the usefulness of the pilot program in responding to the personal and professional needs of individual members of the armed forces.
- A description of reasons why servicemembers choose to participate in the pilot.

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- A description of the servicemembers, if any, who did not return to active duty at the conclusion of their sabbatical, and a statement of the reasons why these servicemembers did not return.¹¹
 - A statement about whether servicemembers were required to perform training as part of their participation in the pilot program, and if so, a description of the servicemembers who were required to perform training, the reasons they were required to perform training, and how often they were required to perform training.
 - A description of the costs to each military department of each pilot program.¹²
 - Recommendations for legislative or administrative action as the Secretary concerned considers appropriate for the modification or continuation of the pilot programs.

¹¹A servicemember choosing not to return to active duty after signing a CIPP agreement extending his or her service commitment may be subject to discipline under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

¹²These costs can include pilot program administrative costs, the pay and benefits provided to servicemembers and their families during the sabbatical, servicemember retraining (if needed), and travel and transportation costs associated with moving servicemembers and their families to a location of their choice during the sabbatical period. According to DOD officials, retraining costs are often incurred during a servicemember's career regardless of participation in CIPP; for example, when a servicemember takes a rotation in an office position and then has to be retrained in the occupation upon return. While not all CIPP participants request moves, for those who do, service officials told us they work to schedule sabbatical start dates with previously scheduled Permanent Change of Station moves and, therefore, DOD may be paying for the servicemembers to move even if they were not taking a sabbatical. In September 2015 we reported that DOD has experienced an overall increase in Permanent Change of Station per-move costs since 2001. See GAO, *Military Compensation: DOD Needs More Complete and Consistent Data to Assess the Costs and Policies of Relocating Personnel*, [GAO-15-713](#) (Washington, D.C. Sep. 9, 2015).

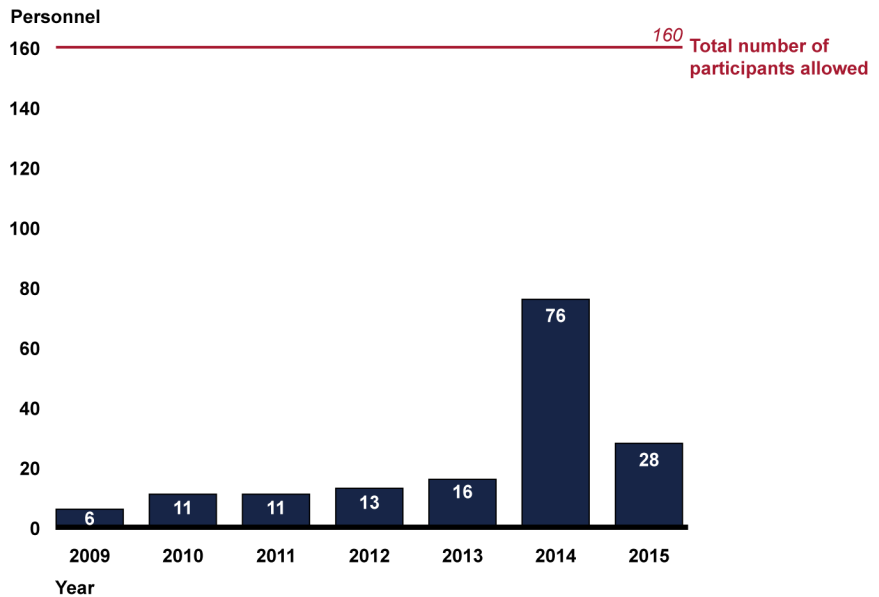
CIPP Participation Has Been Lower Than Authorized Limits and the Military Services Have Identified Factors That Could Affect Participation, but DOD Has Not Established a Plan for Evaluating the Effect of CIPP on Retention

Participation in CIPP has remained below statutorily authorized limits, and officials have identified factors that could be affecting CIPP participation, but DOD has not established a plan for evaluating whether CIPP is an effective means to retain servicemembers. The rate of DOD-wide participation in CIPP has been at less than half the authorized limit of 160 participants per calendar year, and officials from each of the services stated that factors including statutory requirements, service-specific limitations, military culture, and personal financial constraints could be affecting participation. Additionally, although DOD officials stated that they would like to make CIPP a permanent program, and the services are required to provide a final report to Congress on its effectiveness, costs, and retention not later than March 1, 2023, DOD has not established a plan for evaluating the effect of the pilot program on retention of servicemembers.

CIPP Participation Has Remained Below Authorized Limits

Since Congress authorized CIPP in fiscal year 2009, participation has remained below authorized limits. As shown in figure 1, DOD is authorized to enroll up to 160 servicemembers per year in the program (up to 40 participants for each of the four services); but DOD-wide, the highest number of participants approved for CIPP was 76, in calendar year 2014.

Figure 1: Total Number of CIPP Participants Approved by All Military Services for Calendar Years 2009 through July 2015



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-16-35

Note: Data are through July 2015. According to service officials, all services except the Air Force accept applications on a rolling basis; therefore, total numbers for calendar year 2015 may increase.

From 2009 through 2012, only Navy personnel were participating in CIPP, but in 2013, the Marine Corps approved its first applicant, and in 2014, personnel from all four services were participating in the pilot. Some of the services have had participation levels closer to the authorized limits. For example, in 2014, of the 76 participants approved, 30 were Navy and 35 were Air Force. However, the Army and Marine Corps were below authorized limits, with 9 servicemembers approved from the Army and 2 from the Marine Corps.

Service Officials Have Identified Factors That May Affect Participation

Service officials identified four factors that may affect participation in CIPP—statutory requirements, service-specific limitations, military culture, and financial constraints.

- **Statutory Requirements**—According to the CIPP authorizing statute, servicemembers are not eligible to participate in the program during the period of their initial active duty service agreement or if they are currently receiving a critical skills retention bonus. These eligibility

criteria reduce the population eligible to apply for CIPP. For example, according to Navy officials, as of July 2015, almost 134,000 Navy servicemembers were ineligible to participate in CIPP because they were in their initial active duty service agreement period. According to a DOD budget analysis document, the initial service agreement for a Navy sailor typically occurs from 18 to 33 years of age, when professional goals compete most strongly with personal goals such as family planning. For example, one participant who responded to our questionnaire stated that she used CIPP after completing her initial service obligation to start her family. However, she would have preferred to take a sabbatical during her initial service obligation period when she was younger.

According to a DOD budget analysis document, for the Navy, retention at a servicemember's first career reenlistment point is the most difficult to achieve. However, if servicemembers elected to participate in CIPP during their first service obligation period, they in effect would be electing retention during this critical timeframe. According to Navy officials, if these servicemembers were able to participate in CIPP, the CIPP-obligated service requirement would extend each servicemember's existing period of obligated service, which could enhance retention.

Another statutory requirement caps the annual number of participants at 40 (20 officers and 20 enlisted) servicemembers per service. An Army official and some Navy officials were of the opinion that the limitations on the number of participants may reduce participation, stating that servicemembers may be hesitant to apply since so few people were selected annually. Proposed language in the fiscal year 2016 NDAA, if enacted, would repeal the prohibition on participation in CIPP by servicemembers who are in their initial obligated service period or who are receiving a critical military skills retention bonus, and it would eliminate program participation caps.

- **Service-specific limitations**—Each military service has established selection processes and eligibility requirements that supplement the statutory requirements established by the NDAA for fiscal year 2009. For example, the Air Force rates applicants in various categories—such as job performance, leadership, experience, job responsibility, and education. As a result, according to Air Force officials, the most competitive applicants were prioritized for participation in CIPP, and less competitive applicants were disapproved for participation in the program. Further, service-specific guidance includes limitations on

participation by servicemembers in certain career fields, such as Army medical personnel and some officers in the Navy Chaplain Corps and Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps, as well as certain enlisted nuclear personnel. According to Navy and Air Force officials, additional career fields that require sustained proficiency (such as operating weapons systems or piloting aircraft), while not restricted from participation in CIPP, may have restrictions on breaks in service. For example, Navy officials stated that officers in the submarine community must receive a waiver to go longer than 3 years without a sea tour, and if officers exceed 5 years without a sea tour they can no longer work in the submarine community—this could occur if an officer took a 3-year sabbatical followed by a 3-year shore tour. According to Navy officials, if individuals in these communities participate in CIPP, measures are taken to ensure that they do not exceed timeframes that would result in the loss of their ability to serve in their community. Additionally, Navy and Air Force officials stated that pilots who do not have a minimum number of flight hours within a certain time period are no longer certified to operate their aircraft, and are required to complete additional training to be recertified. A Navy official stated that pilots are not disqualified from their position; however, additional training further extends the officer's time out of operational service, which may affect the officer's promotion potential.

- **Military culture**—Officials from each service also stated that participation may be influenced by military culture, and that servicemembers have the perception that a break in service may have a negative effect on upward advancement. Specifically, officials from all the services stated that servicemembers may not trust assurances as to how a break in service would be viewed by promotion boards. For example, one participant was concerned that “a break in service would be viewed as taking an off-ramp, an easy path, taking [oneself] out of the fast lane,” but upon returning from sabbatical has been reassured by knowledge of other participants who have returned from their sabbaticals and received promotions. Another participant reported being “told explicitly by my chain of command [before entering the program] that my career would suffer”; and another reported that upon returning from sabbatical the servicemember would “meet people, sadly even some senior leaders, who are not familiar with the program and assume I have decided to prioritize family over career or assume I do not want to [remain] competitive for advancement.” CIPP authorizing language includes provisions designed to mitigate any potential negative effect of a sabbatical on career advancement, but according to Army and Navy officials, until

more CIPP participants return from sabbaticals and demonstrate career advancement, servicemembers may be hesitant to participate.

- **Financial constraints**—The salary that servicemembers receive during the sabbatical period is equivalent to approximately 2 days of pay per month. Additionally, according to DOD policy, service members may not receive special or incentive pay or bonus payments while on sabbatical. Officials from the Army and the Navy stated that participation in CIPP likely will remain limited because servicemembers need financial resources to support themselves and their families during the sabbatical. One of the CIPP participants who responded to our questionnaire emphasized the need to have another source of income while participating. Another participant reported the opinion that CIPP “gives a [servicemember] options that are not available in any other program. However, the deal is not that great for the member—mainly because of the monetary hit. Since a member is coming back, I think it is possible to allow a person to receive some pay while participating in CIPP.”

DOD Has Not Established a Plan for Evaluating Whether CIPP Is an Effective Means to Retain Servicemembers

In February 2009, OUSD(P&R) issued a directive-type memorandum that authorized—but did not require—the Secretary of each military department to implement CIPP.¹³ According to the memorandum, if the services did implement CIPP, they were required to develop a method to evaluate the program. Specifically, the memorandum stated that the services should “have the appropriate oversight, analytical rigor, and proper evaluation methodologies” to evaluate the pilot. In September 2015, OUSD(P&R) reissued the memorandum and, among other things, included a requirement for each service to report to OUSD(P&R) annually on the status and effectiveness of the program. This report is to include information on the demographics of CIPP applicants, criteria used for selecting applicants, an assessment of the effectiveness of the program, and recommendations for legislative or administrative actions for the modification or continuation of the CIPP. However, neither DOD nor the services have developed a plan for evaluating the extent to which the pilot program is an effective means to retain servicemembers. The updated memorandum also clarifies DOD’s policy on servicemember benefits

¹³Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) Memorandum, *Pilot Programs on Career Flexibility to Enhance Retention of Service Members*, (Feb 4, 2009).

while on sabbatical and includes a requirement for each service to report to OUSD(P&R) on June 1st of each year on the program's progression.¹⁴

More specifically, based on the revised guidance, beginning June 1, 2016, the services will be required to provide OUSD(P&R) an evaluation of whether:

- the authorities for CIPP provide an effective means to enhance the retention of participant servicemembers possessing critical skills, talents, and leadership;
- the career progression of participant servicemembers has been or will be adversely affected; and
- CIPP is useful in responding to the personal and professional needs of individual servicemembers.

These reporting elements are also required in the services' final report to Congress, due March 2023. Interim reports on the implementation and current status of the pilot programs are due in 2017 and 2019.¹⁵ DOD has proposed expansion of the pilot, and the proposed fiscal year 2016 NDAA includes language that will remove the pilot's participation cap and some restrictions on participation. Additionally, DOD officials stated that CIPP should be made available permanently; however, without an evaluation of the program, the basis for DOD's proposed changes to the program is unclear.

¹⁴Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness), *Directive-type Memorandum (DTM) 15-005, Pilot Programs on Career Flexibility to Enhance Retention of Service Members*, (Sep 8, 2015) directs each military department implementing a CIPP to submit to the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness an annual report discussing current status and assessment of the program. The first report is due June 1, 2016.

¹⁵The services are also required to submit biennial interim reports to the congressional defense committees detailing the implementation and current status of the pilot programs. The reports were expected for June 1, 2011, 2013, and 2015, as well as 2017 and 2019. The Navy provided reports in 2011, 2013, and 2015. These reports cite positive experiences with CIPP, but they do not provide a full evaluation of the program because so few servicemembers had completed sabbaticals. The Air Force, Army, and Marine Corps provided their first reports in 2015, and similarly, since most servicemembers in these services have only recently begun their sabbaticals, they provide a status update on program participation, but they do not include an evaluation of the effectiveness of the program.

We have identified key features that should be included in pilot program evaluation plans, and along with private professional auditing and evaluation organizations, we have found that a well-developed and documented evaluation plan can help ensure that agency evaluations generate performance information needed to make effective program and policy decisions.¹⁶ Well-developed evaluation plans include key features such as:

- well-defined, clear, and measurable objectives;
- criteria or standards for determining pilot-program performance;
- clearly articulated methodology, including sound sampling methods, determination of appropriate sample size for the evaluation design, and a strategy for comparing the pilot results with other efforts;
- a clear plan that details the type and source of data necessary to evaluate the pilot, methods for data collection, and the timing and frequency of data collection; and
- a detailed data-analysis plan to track the program's performance and evaluate the final results of the project.

Although the services are required to evaluate the effectiveness of CIPP, currently they do not have any plans for evaluating the program. Without a plan for evaluating the pilot that includes these key features, there will be limited assurance that the evaluations conducted will provide the information needed to make decisions about the future of CIPP.

Moreover, the establishment of a plan including key features such as well-defined, clear, and measurable objectives and standards for determining pilot-program performance may aid in addressing some of the challenges posed by the pilot's timeline. Prior to the establishment of the June 2016 OUSD(P&R) reporting requirement, officials from all four services raised concerns about their ability to evaluate the effectiveness of the program so soon after implementation. Specifically, Marine Corps and Army officials stated that it is too early to determine the program's effect on retention, and that it can take several years after a participant starts a sabbatical to determine whether the program contributed to

¹⁶[GAO-09-45](#).

retention. Marine Corps officials stated that if a participant took the maximum 3-year sabbatical followed by a 6-year obligated service period, it could take up to 9 years to determine whether the individual would decide to stay in the armed services beyond his or her period of obligated service. As of July 2015, of the 133 program participants, 5 have completed the obligated service period. Putting plans in place for how the pilot will be evaluated can guide the services on the data they need to collect as the pilot progresses, and can better position them to assess the pilot's performance.

Navy Officials Stated That CIPP Has Provided an Option to Respond to Personal Needs of Servicemembers

According to Navy officials, CIPP has provided an option for the Navy to respond to the personal needs of servicemembers, and they believe the program has helped to retain servicemembers who otherwise might have left the military. Additionally, a DOD budget analysis document states that the Navy will retain a servicemember for a longer time period by using a combination of monetary and non-monetary incentives than would have been possible using only a single incentive. According to this document, in the Navy's experience, financial incentives alone have not been adequate to retain certain categories of servicemembers, such as nuclear-trained surface warfare officers and senior nuclear-trained enlisted sailors serving on submarines and aircraft carriers. Navy CIPP participants have come from a range of career fields, including aviators, engineers, medical personnel, nuclear-trained surface warfare officers, and others.

Navy officials stated that they are not using CIPP to address any specific critical skills, but that a servicemember's occupation is given consideration during the CIPP approval process. According to the Navy's 2011 interim report to Congress, CIPP applicants need certain qualifications, including a record of demonstrating strong and sustained performance in challenging positions, leadership, professional skills, resourcefulness, ability or potential to contribute to and succeed in the Navy, and exemplary personal behavior and integrity. For example, according to a Navy CIPP document, a Petty Officer Second Class was identified by the JAG Corps as a servicemember who displayed the aptitude, work ethic, and talent needed to serve as an attorney. This individual was encouraged to take a sabbatical to complete her degree, earn a Juris Doctorate, and apply for a commission in the JAG Corps upon return from the sabbatical. After a 36-month sabbatical this servicemember earned a commission in the JAG Corps and became an attorney in the Navy.

In addition, officials stated that a career sabbatical may help to address the work-life balance that cannot be achieved through other human-capital programs. For example, one participant who responded to our questionnaire reported: “[I] believe [CIPP] provides a suitable option for work/life balance that helps offset goals/issues that cannot be addressed while on active duty and gives sailors an option besides getting out entirely.” In particular, officials stated that they are concerned that the Navy’s recurring sea-tour requirement may result in the loss of servicemembers with short-term personal needs or skill sets that are in demand in the private sector. For example, another respondent reported: “[CIPP] is a great option for sailors who need to take a break from the arduous duty and demands of the Navy. Additionally, it can give sailors who are thinking about leaving the Navy the experience of what it is like to be in the civilian sector.”

The Navy collects information from participants, both when they start their sabbatical and when they return, about the extent to which CIPP was a factor in the participants’ choice to stay in the Navy; whether participants intend to make the Navy their career; whether participants would recommend CIPP to other servicemembers’ and whether CIPP has negatively affected their career. Also, a Navy CIPP document provided examples of participants who fared well with their career milestones following their return to active duty. For example, according to CIPP program managers, one officer was selected for promotion following sabbatical, and two other officers were selected for administrative screening boards upon their return.¹⁷ Our questionnaire asked CIPP participants if since returning to active duty, they have been told or otherwise experienced something specific that indicated CIPP participation might affect their career advancement. The responses were mixed. We received examples expressing the view that use of a sabbatical for educational purposes was positive because the education received while on sabbatical was beneficial for career advancement. Conversely, there were negative examples reporting that Navy chain of command views the break in service as a “lack of commitment,” or “leaving community while others continued to work.”

¹⁷ Administrative and screening boards take place at certain points automatically in an officer’s career and can result in a servicemember’s advancing in rank (for example, a chief being selected for Chief Warrant Officer).

Conclusions

Congress authorized CIPP as a pilot program to help the services offer greater flexibility in career paths for servicemembers with the hope of increasing the retention of personnel with critical skills. All of the military services have implemented CIPP, and DOD officials have stated that the program should become permanent. Beginning in June 2016, the services will be required to evaluate and report annually on the effectiveness of the pilot. However, they do not have a plan to guide these evaluation efforts and help determine the extent to which the pilot program is an effective means to retain servicemembers. Without a plan that includes key features for evaluating CIPP's value as a retention tool, DOD will be unlikely to determine the extent to which CIPP is achieving its intended purpose and thereby inform decision makers as to whether it should become a permanent program.

Recommendation for Executive Action

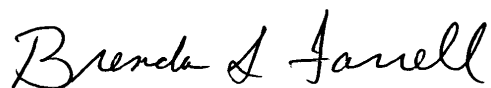
To assist DOD in determining whether CIPP is meeting its intended purpose of enhancing retention and providing greater flexibility in the career path of servicemembers, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, in collaboration with the service secretaries, develop and implement a plan to evaluate the pilot that includes key features such as well-defined, clear, and measurable objectives and standards for determining pilot-program performance.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. In written comments, which are reprinted in their entirety in Appendix II, DOD concurred with our recommendation. DOD noted that they recognize the importance of developing well-defined measures to evaluate the effectiveness and utility of CIPP. DOD also provided technical comments, which we have incorporated in the report where appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Secretaries of the military departments. The report also is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brenda S. Farrell". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Brenda S. Farrell
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

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House of Representatives

Appendix I: Status of the Career Intermission Pilot Program (CIPP) Implementation

The Navy implemented CIPP in 2009, followed by the Marine Corps in 2013, and the Air Force and Army in 2014; as of July 2015, the services had approved 161 servicemembers to participate in CIPP. The Navy has approved the highest number of participants, and as of July 2015, 37 participants have completed sabbaticals and returned to active duty. Table 1 shows the number and demographics of CIPP participants for each military service.

Table 1: Total Number of CIPP Participants Approved by Each Military Service as of July 2015

Service	Number of applicants	Applicants approved ^a	Actual participants (male)		Actual participants (female)		Total actual participants
			Officer	Enlisted	Officer	Enlisted	
Navy	130	111	9	29	26	29	93
Air Force	46	35	6	9	7	8	30
Army	10	9	1	1	1	3	6
Marine Corps	7	6	2	1	0	1	4
TOTALS	193	161	18	40	34	41	133

Source: GAO analysis of DOD Data. | GAO-16-35

^aSome servicemembers withdrew their applications after they were approved; therefore, the number approved is greater than the number of actual participants.

Note: According to service officials, all services except the Air Force accept applications on a rolling basis; therefore, total numbers for calendar year 2015 may increase.

- Navy**—From 2009 to July 2015, 130 Navy servicemembers applied to participate in CIPP and 111 were approved, 11 were disapproved, 6 withdrew their applications before a final decision had been made, and 2 applications are pending. Of the 111 approved, 18 declined the offer. As of July 2015, 37 had completed sabbaticals. Of these 37, one separated before completing obligated service and 5 have completed their CIPP-related obligated service. Of these 5, one has since left active duty for the Navy Reserves, and one has since separated from the Navy. Participants used the program for several purposes, including pursuing higher education, supporting family (care for ailing parents or caring for young children), and staggering career timelines for dual-military spouses.
- Air Force**—In 2014, 46 Air Force servicemembers applied to participate in CIPP and 35 applicants were approved (1 was removed from the program for quality reasons arising after selection to the program). Of the remaining 34 selected, 4 declined the offer, and 30 accepted. As of July 2015, 23 participants had begun a sabbatical. The Air Force disapproved 11 applicants because they did not meet

basic eligibility requirements or, according to Air Force officials, did not have competitive performance ratings. Participants plan to use their sabbaticals to, among other things, pursue education, care for a family member or start a family, and realign assignment timing or date of rank with an active-duty spouse to facilitate joint spouse assignment.

- **Army**—In 2014, 10 Army servicemembers applied to participate in CIPP and 1 was determined to be ineligible due to remaining service obligation and 9 were approved. Of the 9 selected, 3 declined the offer in favor of other personnel actions, and 6 accepted. The 6 participants were expected to begin sabbaticals in summer 2015. Participants plan to use their sabbaticals to pursue higher education, address family and medical issues, travel, and align assignment cycle with an active-duty spouse.
- **Marine Corps**—In 2013, 3 Marines applied and were approved, but one subsequently withdrew the application. In 2014, 2 applied and were approved, but one withdrew. In 2015, 2 applied, 1 was accepted, and 1 was determined to be ineligible. As of July 2015, 3 of the 4 total participants were on sabbatical. Applicants requested the sabbaticals to move with a spouse and attend graduate school, to focus on family and children, or to attend seminary.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense



OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

OCT 13 2015

Ms. Brenda S. Farrell
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Farrell:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to GAO Draft Report, GAO-16-35, *Military Personnel: DoD Should Develop a Plan to Evaluate the Effectiveness of its Career Intermission Program*, (GAO Code 352020), dated September 25, 2015.

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the draft report. We appreciate your staff's analysis of the Career Intermission Program and recognize the importance of developing well-defined measures to evaluate the effectiveness and utility of this pilot program.

The Department's official written comments for inclusion in the report are enclosed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, likely of Juliet M. Beyler, is positioned above her name and title.

Juliet M. Beyler
Director, Officer and Enlisted Personnel
Management (Military Personnel Policy)

Enclosures:
As stated

Cc:
Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army (Military Personnel and Quality of Life)
Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Military Personnel Policy)
Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Force Management Integration

**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED SEPTEMBER 25, 2015
GAO-16-35 (GAO CODE 352020)**

**“MILITARY PERSONNEL: DOD SHOULD DEVELOP A PLAN TO EVALUATE THE
EFFECTIVENESS OF ITS CAREER INTERMISSION PROGRAM”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION**

To assist DOD in determining whether the Career Intermission Pilot Program is meeting its intended purpose of enhancing retention and providing greater flexibility in the career path of servicemembers, the GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense take the following action:

RECOMMENDATION: Direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, in collaboration with the Service Secretaries, to develop and implement a plan to evaluate the pilot which includes key features such as well-defined, clear, and measurable objectives and standards for determining pilot program performance.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Personnel Policy will collaborate with the Military Services to develop common measures of effectiveness for evaluating the Career Intermission Pilot Program.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Brenda S. Farrell, (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Kimberly Seay (Assistant Director), Vijay Barnabas, Tim Carr, Amie Lesser, Felicia Lopez, Richard Powelson, Tida Reveley, and Michael Silver made major contributions to this report.

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